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Anarchism and Anti-Intellectualism in Russia

Paul Avrich

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The Russian anarchist movement, which emerged at the beginning of the XXth century, manifested a deep-seated distrust of rational systems and of the intellectuals who constructed them. While inheriting the Enlightenment's belief in the inherent goodness of man, the Russian anarchists generally did not share the faith of the *philosophes* in the power of abstract reason. Anti-intellectualism appeared in varying degrees throughout the budding movement. Least evident among the bookish disciples of Peter Kropotkin, it was particularly strong within the terrorist groups-*Beznachalie* (Without Authority) and *Chernoe Znamia* (The Black Banner)-which sprang up on the eve of the 1905 Revolution. The terrorists, who belittled book-learning and ratiocination, exalted instinct, will, and action as the highest measures of man. "*Im Anfang war die Tat*," an aphorism of Goethe's, adorned the masthead of the

journal *Chernoe znamia* in 1905-"In the beginning there was the deed."[1]

The anarchists, rejecting the notion that society is governed by rational laws, maintained that so-called "scientific" theories of history and sociology were artificial contrivances of the human brain which served only to impede the natural and spontaneous impulses of mankind. The doctrines of Karl Marx bore the brunt of their criticism. In 1904, the leader of the *Beznachalie* group assailed "all these 'scientific' sociological systems concocted in the socialist or pseudo-anarchist kitchen, which have nothing in common with the genuine scientific creations of Darwin, Newton, and Galileo."[2] In the same spirit, a prominent figure within the *Chernoe Znamia* organization attacked the impersonal rationalism of Hegel and his Marxist disciples:

> An idea must not be left to pure understanding, must not be apprehended by reason alone, but must be converted into feeling, must be soaked in 'the nerves' juices and the heart's blood.' Only feeling, passion, and desire have moved and will move men to acts of heroism and self-sacrifice; only in the realm of passionate life, the life of feeling, do heroes and martyrs draw their strength … We do not belong to the worshipers of 'all that is real is rational'; we do not recognize the inevitability of social phenomena; we regard with skepticism the scientific value of many so-called laws of sociology.[3]

[1] *Chernoe znamia*, No. 1 (December 1905), 1.

[2] A. Bidbei, *O Liutsifere, velikom dukhe vozmushcheniia, "nesoznatel'nosti," anarkhii i beznachaliia* (n.p. [Paris?], 1904), 10.

[3] *Burevestnik*, (Oct. 30, 1906), 3.

keep the revolution from being diverted into non-socialist and nonlibertarian channels. And Russia, once again, had come to be locked in the arms of centralized state power, which was squeezing out her life's breath.[51]

By the end of the Russian Civil War (1918–1921), these voices of protest had all been silenced by the government. Those anarchists who refused to cooperate with the new regime were sent to prison or into Siberian exile. The Russian anarchist movement was crushed forever. For those who managed to flee to the West, as a sympathetic student of anarchism wisely observed, there remained the bitterness of having seen the revolution turn into the very opposite of all their hopes; at most, there could be the melancholy consolation that their forefather, Bakunin, looking at Marxism a half-century before, had prophesied it all.[52]

[51] *Vol'nyi golos truda*, No. 4, 16 September 1918, 1–2. The new journal, like its predecessor, was closed down after this issue.

[52] George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (Cleveland and New York, 1962), 418.

Anarchists told the workers of the capital to "reject the words, orders, and decrees of the commissars," and to create their own libertarian commune after the model of 1871.[48]

At the same time, the anarchists launched a new series of attacks on Marxist theory. The Gordin brothers, two of the most prolific anarchist writers in 1917 and 1918, scornfully labelled dialectical materialism "the new scientific Christianity, destined to conquer the bourgeois world by deceiving the people, the proletariat, just as Christianity deceived the feudal world."[49] Marx and Engels, they wrote, were "the Magi of scientific socialist black-magic."[50] A more penetrating critique of the new regime appeared in September 1918 in a new Anarcho-Syndicalist journal, *Vol'nyi golos truda* (The Free Voice of Labor), the successor to *Golos truda*, which the Soviet government had shut down in the spring of that year. The article, entitled "Paths of Revolution," began with a severe indictment of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" which Lenin and his associates claimed to have instituted after overthrowing the Provisional Government. The Bolshevik Revolution, the author asserted, had merely substituted state capitalism for private capitalism; one big owner had taken the place of many small ones. The peasants and workers had fallen under the heel of "a new class of administrators-a new class born largely from the womb of the intelligentsia." The privileges and authority once shared by the Russian nobility and bourgeoisie had passed into the hands of a new ruling stratum, composed of party officials, government bureaucrats, and technical specialists. In the hour of revolution, the article lamented, the anarchists-who, unlike the Marxists, truly believed that the liberation of the working class was the task of the workers themselves-had been too poorly organized to

[48] Burevestnik (April 9, 1918), 2.

[49] *Ibid.* (April 10), 3.

[50] Brat'ia Gordiny, *Manifest Pananarkhistov* (Moscow, 1918), 60.

To gain an understanding of man and society, the writer advised, one should ignore the a priori "laws" of the sociologists and turn instead to the empirical data of psychology.

The anti-intellectualism of the Russian anarchists was rooted in three radical traditions of XIXth-century Europe. The first, of course, was anarchism itself, the doctrines of Godwin, Stirner, and Proudhon, and, most important by far for the Russian anarchist movement, the doctrines of Bakunin; the second (paradoxically, since the Marxists were the principal target of the Russian anarchists) was a strand of Marxist thought; and the third was the syndicalist movement which emerged in France towards the end of the century.

Mikhail Bakunin, the father of Russian anarchism, considered himself himself a revolutionist of the deed, "not a philosopher and not an inventor of systems, like Marx."[4] By teaching the working masses theories, Bakunin declared, Marx would only succeed in stifling the revolutionary ardor every man already possessed-"the impulse to liberty, the passion for equality, the holy instinct of revolt."[5] Unlike Marx's "scientific" socialism, his own socialism, Bakunin asserted, was "purely instinctive."[6] He rejected the view that social change depended on the gradual maturation of "objective" historical conditions. Men shaped their own destinies, he insisted. Their lives could not be squeezed into a Procrustean bed of abstract sociological formulas. "No theory, no ready-made system, no book that has ever been written will save the world," Bakunin declared. "I cleave to no sys- tem. I am a true seeker."[7]

Bakunin adamantly refused to recognize the existence of any "*a priori* ideas or preordained, preconceived laws."[8] He deni-

[4] Iu. M. Steklov, *Mikhail Aleksandrovich Bakunin: ego zhizn' i deiatel'nost'*, 1814–1876 (4 vols., Moscow, 1926–1927), III, 112.

[5] Michel Bakounine, *Oeuvres* (6 vols., Paris, 1895–1913), II, 399.

[6] Steklov, op. cit., I, 189.

[7] E. H. Carr, *Michael Bakunin* (London, 1937), 167.

[8] Bakunin, op. cit., I, 91.

grated the "scientific" system-builders-above all, the Marxists and Comteansand their so-called "science of society," which was sacrificing real life on the altar of scholastic abstractions.[9] Bakunin did not wish to shed the fictions of religion and metaphysics merely to replace them with what he considered the new fictions of pseudo-scientific sociology. He therefore proclaimed a "*revolt of life against science, or rather, against the rule of science*."[10] The mission of science was not to govern men but to rescue them from superstition, drudgery, and disease. "In a word," Bakunin declared, "science is the guiding compass of life, but not life itself."[11]

Bakunin's distrust of abstract theories extended to the intellectuals who spun them. Although he himself assigned the intellectuals a major role in the revolutionary struggle, Bakunin condemned his Marxist rivals as self-centered seekers of political power, who used their theories to becloud the minds of the masses. The Marxian "dictatorship of the proletariat," Bakunin wrote in 1872, "would be the rule of *scientific intellect*, the most autocratic, the most despotic, the most arrogant, the most insolent of all regimes. There will be a new class, a new hierarchy of genuine or sham savants, and the world will be divided into a dominant minority in the name of science, and an immense ignorant majority."[12]

According to Bakunin, the followers of Marx and of Comte as well were "priests of science," ordained in a new "privileged church of the mind and superior education."[13] In order to forestall the rule of the intelligentsia over the people, Bakunin called for complete equality of education. An integrated education in science and handicrafts (but not in religion, metaphysics, or sociology) would enable all citizens to engage

[9] *Ibid.*, III, 92.
[10] *Ibid.*, III, 95.
[11] *Ibid.*, III, 89.
[12] *Ibid.*, IV, 477.
[13] Franco Venturi, *Roots of Revolution* (New York, 1960), 432–433.

they insisted, hinged on the decentralization of political and economic authority. "We appeal to the slaves," proclaimed *Golos truda* on the morrow of the insurrection, "to reject any form of domination. We call upon them to create *their own non-party labor organizations*, freely associated among themselves in the towns, villages, districts, and provinces, helping one another…"[43] The soviets, warned the syndicalist journal, must remain decentralized units, free from party bosses and from so-called "people's commissars." If any political group attempted to convert them into instruments of coercion, the people must be ready to take up arms once more.[44]

Anarchist circles in Petrograd were soon buzzing with talk of "a third and last stage of the revolution," a final struggle between "Social Democratic power and the creative spirit of the masses … between the authoritarian and libertarian systems … between the Marxist principle and the anarchist principle."[45] There were ominous murmurings among the Kronstadt sailors to the effect that, if the new Council of People's Commissars dared betray the revolution, the cannons that took the Winter Place in October would be able to take Smolny (headquarters of the Bolshevik government) as well.[46] The anarchists insisted, to quote the words of an anarchist speaker at the First Congress of Trade Unions (January 1918), that the revolution had been made "not only by the intellectuals, but by the masses"; therefore, it was imperative for Russia "to listen to the voice of the working masses, the voice from below…"[47] The Paris Commune, once invoked as the ideal society to replace the Provisional Government, now became the anarchist answer to Lenin's dictatorship. The Petrograd Federation of

[43] *Golos truda*, No. 13 (Nov. 3, 1917), 1.
[44] *Ibid.*, No. 15 (Nov. 6, 1917), 1; No. 17 (Nov. 8, 1917), 1.
[45] Voline, *La Revolution inconnue*, 1917–1921 (Paris, 1943), 190f.
[46] *Ibid.*, 200.
[47] *Pervyi vserossiiskii s"ezd professional'nykh soiuzov, 7–14 ianvaria 1918 g.* (Moscow, 1918), 50.

new privileged class, to lord it over the masses; let us hope, it declared, that the people will be wise enough not to let Kerenskii and Lenin become their new masters-"the Danton and Robespierre" of the Russian Revolution.[41]

The Bolshevik victories in the Petrograd and Moscow Soviets inspired in the anarchist leaders the fear that the soviets might be reduced to vehicles of political power. The soviets, as the anarchists viewed them, were non-political bodies, chosen directly in the localities, without the use of party lists. Their function was to handle such matters as housing, food distribution, job placement, and education, thus resembling, in some respects, the French *bourses du travail. Golos truda (The Voice of Labor)*, the principal organ of the Russian Anarcho-Syndicalists, underscored the fact that the soviets had sprung from the midst of the working people, not "from the brain of this or that party leader"; the Russian people, it continued, would not permit them to fall under the domination of professional revolutionaries, as Lenin apparently desired, judging from his "semi-Blanquist" statements in *What Is To Be Done?* The Bolshevik slogan "All power to the soviets," declared *Golos truda*, was acceptable only if it signi- fied the "decentralization and diffusion of power," not the mere transfer of authority from one group to another.[42]

When the Bolsheviks overthrew the Provisional Government on October 25, the anarchists shared in the jubilation, but they were, at the same time, troubled by the formation of a Council of People's Commissars composed exclusively of members of Lenin's party. The anarchists objected that such a concentration of political power would destroy the long-awaited social revolution; the success of the revolution,

sheviks; the latter changed their name to the Communist party in March 1918.

[41] *Ibid.*

[42] *Golos truda*, No. 1 (August 11, 1917), 2. Cf. *Vol'nyi Kronshtadt*, No. 3 (Oct. 23, 1917), 1.

in both manual and mental pursuits, so that in the good society of the future there would be "neither workers nor scientists, but only men."[14]

At the close of the century, Peter Kropotkin developed Bakunin's concept of the "whole" man in his book *Fields, Factories, and Workshops*. At some length, Kropotkin described the "integrated" community in which everyone would perform both mental and manual labor and live in blissful harmony.[15] Like Bakunin, Kropotkin distrusted those who claimed to possess superior wisdom or who preached so-called "scientific" dogmas.[16] The proper function of the intellectuals, he believed, was not to order the people about, but to help them prepare for the great task of emancipation; "and when men's minds are prepared and external circumstances are favorable," Kropotkin declared, "the final rush is made, not by the group that initiated the movement, but by the mass of people…"[17]

A second source of anti-intellectualism among the younger generation of Russian anarchists was Marxist literature, an ironical fact, considering Bakunin's and Kropotkin's suspicions of the Social Democrats. The anarchists were attracted by a single idea that appeared frequently in Marx's writings, namely that the working class should liberate itself through its own efforts instead of depending on some outside savior to do the job. In the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, Marx and Engels wrote that "all previous movements were movements of minorities, or in the interests of minorities"; however, "the proletarian movement is the self-conscious independent movement of the immense majority in the interests of the immense majority." 18 In 1850, Marx reiterated this theme of revolu-

[14] Bakunin, op. cit., V, 145.

[15] Peter Kropotkin, *Fields, Factories, and Workshops* (London, 1899).

[16] Kropotkin, *Modern Science and Anarchism* (New York, 1908), 86.

[17] Kropotkin, "Revolutionary Government," in *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets*, ed. Roger N. Baldwin (New York, 1927), 247.

tionary action by the workers themselves in an address to the central committee of the Communist League. He called on the workingmen of Europe to launch a "revolution in permanence" in order to establish their own proletarian government in the form of municipal councils or workers' committees.[18] When, some twenty years later in 1871, Parisian radicals organized a revolutionary commune and, in an anarchistic spirit, called for the conversion of France into a decentralized federation of free municipalities, Marx hailed the Paris Commune as "the glorious harbinger of a new society."[19]

To more than a few anarchists, it must have seemed as though Marx, by appealing for a "permanent revolution," had jettisoned-if only temporarily-his rigid historical determinism for a radical plan of revolt that aimed to achieve the stateless society in the immediate future. And his praise of the Paris Commune, which the anarchists considered a foretaste of the earthly paradise, was most welcome. In actuality, Marx valued the Commune only as a weapon to destroy bourgeois society and not as a model for the future-indeed, he instinctively distrusted spontaneous organizations in which party control would be lost. But by supporting the overthrow of the highly centralized French government through the direct action of a "workers'" commune (many of the Communards, in reality, were "bourgeois" intellectuals), Marx appeared to be advocating nothing less than a social revolution, the anarchist dream. Moreover, Marx's favorable reception of the Commune seemed quite consistent with the famous sentence in his preamble to the bylaws of the newly-founded First International in 1864: "The emancipation of the working class must be accomplished by the working class itself."[20] Whereas Marx actually had in mind the conquest of *political power*,

[18] *Ibid.*, I, 106–117.

[19] *Ibid.*, I, 542.

[20] *Ibid.*, I, 386.

spirit of pan-destruction was awakening in the hearts of the oppressed, that Russia was "on the eve of a great social tempest."[36]

Even the comparatively temperate followers of Kropotkin echoed the words of Bakunin in their attacks on the notion of a "proletarian dictatorship." According to the journal of Kropotkin's *Khleb i Volia* circle, Plekhanov, Martov, and Lenin were the "priests, Magi, and shamans" of the modern age.[37] The socialists, wrote one of Kropotkin's young disciples, had been reared in "the Jacobin tradition" of ordering others about and were likely to persist in their will to power, thus compelling the workers to liberate themselves by their own efforts "from God, the state, and the lawyers-especially the lawyers."[38]

During the dozen years which separated the Revolutions of 1905 and 1917, the anarchists in exile continued to criticize the Social Democrats as ambitious intellectuals who ultimately would betray the workers and peasants. And those who returned to Russia after the February Revolution, although they shared Lenin's determination to destroy the "bourgeois" Provisional Government, never forgot Bakunin's warnings about the power-hungry Marxists. All their suspicions of the "socialist-careerists"[39] rose to the surface in September 1917, after the Bolshevik party won majorities in both the Petrograd and Moscow Soviets. The journal of the Petrograd Federation of Anarchists recollected the oft-repeated allegation of Bakunin and Kropotkin that the so-called "dictatorship of the proletariat" really meant "the dictatorship of the Social Democratic party."[40] Every revolution of the past, the journal reminded its readers, simply yielded a new set of tyrants, a

[36] *Ibid.*, 27–28.

[37] *Khleb i volia*, No. 17 (May 1905), 7.

[38] K. Orgeiani, *O rabochikh soiuzakh* (London, 1907), 4–5.

[39] *Golos truda*, No. 11 (Oct. 20, 1917), 3.

[40] *Svobodnaia kommuna*, No. 2, 2 October 1917, 2. In 1917, the "Social Democratic party" still officially embraced both the Mensheviks and the Bol-

there were many anarchists who read this proclamation as an appeal for a social revolt of the masses, with the object of annihilating rather than merely capturing the state. Marx's ringing sentence in the rules of 1864 was to appear again and again in Russian anarchist literature, sometimes accompanied by a stanza from the Internationale bearing the identical message:

> Il n'est pas de sauveurs supremes:
> Ni dieu, ni cesar, ni tribun.
> Producteurs, sauvons-nous nous memes,
> Decretons le salut commun![21]

The anti-intellectualism of the Russian anarchists was also influenced by the strong antagonism towards intellectuals and politicians which developed within the revolutionary syndicalist movement in France shortly before the turn of the century. This hostility stemmed from the belief that intellectuals were a separate, softhanded breed who had little in common with workingmen at the bench. Nothing could be gained from the political theories of the intellectuals, the syndicalists insisted. Capitalism could be eliminated -and the proletariat thereby liberated-only through the direct industrial action of the workers' unions themselves. Fernand Pelloutier, the foremost syndicalist leader, drew a sharp distinction between the political orientation of the socialists and the undiluted revolutionism of his syndicalist followers, who were "rebels at all times, men truly without a god, without a master, and without a country, the irreconcilable enemies of all despotism, moral or collective-the enemies, that is, of laws and dictatorships, including the dictatorship of the proletariat."[22] This anti-political bias became the official policy of the General Confederation of

[21] See, for example, *Khleb i volia*, No. 15 (Feb. 1905), 2; No. 23 (Oct. 1905), 7; and *Golos anarkhista*, No. 1 (11 Mar. 11, 1918), 2.

[22] Pelloutier, *Histoire des bourses du travail* (Paris, 1902), ix.

sia, too, the ideas of the French syndicalists spread rapidly, especially after the relaxation of censorship following the Revolution of 1905, when a host of syndicalist books and pamphlets, including Pelloutier's classic *Histoire des bourses du travail*, were published legally in St. Petersburg and Moscow.[33]

Bakuninism, Syndicalism, and even Marxism itself nourished the anti-intellectualism of the Russian anarchists in the early years of the twentieth century and furnished them with the slogans that they used against their socialist rivals. In the spirit of Bakunin, the leader of the *Beznachalie* terrorists (Bidbei, by name) denounced "the insatiable plunderers and cheap men of ambition, all the geniuses and pigmies of Caesarism, all the pitiful cads and lackeys, and all sorts of vampires and bloodsuckers of the people" who were flocking to join the Social Democratic party.[34] The Russian Marxists, he continued, were "worshipers in the cult of servility," whose unquenchable thirst for discipline was driving them to establish an "all-Russian centralization of power …the autocracy of Plekhanov and Company."[35] Bidbei deplored the fact that Marx's followers, like their teacher, considered the peasants and the *Lumpenproletariat* amorphous elements of society who lacked the necessary class-consciousness to be an effective revolutionary force. If the socialists would only dispense with their drawn-out phases of revolutionary struggle and recognize the awful might of the dark masses, they would see that the "great day of retribution" was rapidly approaching (these words were written in 1904), that the

[33] The most important works to appear were Fernand Pelloutier, *Istoriia birzh truda (Histoire des bourses du travail)*, (St. Petersburg, 1906); Pelloutier, *Zhizn' rabochikh vo Frantsii (La Vie ouvriere en France)*, (St. Petersburg, 1906); N. Kritskaia and N. Lebedev, *Istoriia sindikal'nogo dvizheniia vo Frantsii, 1789–1907* (Moscow, 1908); and a series of books published by V. A. Posse under the general title of *Biblioteka Rabochego*.

[34] Bidbei, op. cit., 1.

[35] *Ibid*., 7.

Labor in 1906, when the Charter of Amiens affirmed the complete independence of the French trade-union movement from all political entanglements.[23]

Pelloutier (who was himself a well-educated former journalist of middle-class upbringing) devoted his energies to the practical affairs of labor organization and direct action, relegating ideological pursuits to those intellectuals who, in his estimation, were not genuinely concerned with the daily struggle of the workers for a better life. The labor unions, he declared, "don't give a hoot for theory, and their empiricism ... is worth at least all the systems in the world, which last as long and are as accurate as predictions in the almanac."[24] Ideologies and utopias never came from manual workers, he maintained, but were dreamed up by middle-class intellectuals who "have sought the remedies for our ills in their own ideas, burning the midnight oil instead of looking at our needs and at reality."[25]

Such theorists of syndicalism as Georges Sorel, Hubert Lagardelle, and]Idouard Berth acknowledged that the practical syndicalist movement owed them very little. Indeed, Sorel and Lagardelle readily conceded that they had learned far more from the active unionists than they had taught them.[26] "Burning the midnight oil," they worked out a philosophy in which the moral value of direct action, rather than its economic results, was of prime importance. No great movement, Sorel maintained, had ever succeeded without its "social myth." In the present instance, the general strike was the "myth" that would inspire the working class to deeds of heroism and sustain it in its daily skirmishes with the bourgeoisie.[27] The general strike was an action slogan, a poetic vision, an image of battle capable of rousing the masses to concerted action and of imbuing them with a powerful sense of moral uplift.[28]

Sorel's high-flown notions were largely ignored by the militants of the syndicalist movement-Victor Griffuelhes, Imile Pouget, Georges Yvetot, and Paul Delesalle. Griffuelhes, general secretary of the CGT after Pelloutier's premature death in 1901, when asked by a parliamentary commission whether he had studied Sorel, replied sardonically: "I read Alexandre Dumas."[29] A shoemaker by trade and a crusty union activist, Griffuelhes accused the bourgeois intellectuals, who in his judgment knew nothing of the tribulations of factory life, of trying to allure the workers with abstract formulas in order to catapult themselves into positions of privilege and authority. "If one reflects too much," he once remarked, "one never does anything."[30] In spite of his Blanquist antecedents, which led him to emphasize the place of a "conscious minority" in the labor movement, Griffuelhes despised the educated men who aspired to leadership in the unions or in public life. "Among the union activists," he wrote in 1908, "there is a feeling of violent opposition to the bourgeoisie... They want passionately to be led by workers."[31]

The hostility of Pelloutier, Griffuelhes, and their colleagues towards the intellectuals made a deep impression on the colony of Russian anarchists living in Parisian exile. In their journal *Khleb i volia* (Bread and Liberty), the exiles praised the syndicalist leaders for barring the white-handed careerists from their movement and for attracting the "best, most energetic, youngest, and freshest forces" of French labor.[32] Inside Rus-

[23] Paul Louis, *Histoire du mouvement syndical en France* (2 vols., Paris, 1947–1948), I, 263.

[24] V. R. Lorwin, *The French Labor Movement* (Cambridge, Mass., 1954), 33.

[25] *Ibid.*, 18.

[26] Louis Levine, *Syndicalism in France* (2 ed., New York, 1914), 155.

[27] Sorel, *Reflections on Violence* (Glencoe, 1950), 48.

[28] *Ibid.*, 89–90, 200–201.

[29] Edouard Dolleans, *Histoire du mouvement ouvrier* (2 vols., Paris, 1936–1946), II, 126–128.

[30] W. Y. Elliott, *The Pragmatic Revolt in Politics* (New York, 1928), 122.

[31] Lorwin, op. cit., 29.

[32] *Khleb i volia* (Paris, 1909), No. 1, 30.